

Syphilis Fact Sheet

HIV/STD Program, Bureau of Health, Maine Department of Human Services

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*. Syphilis infection occurs in four stages, named primary, secondary, latent (hidden), and tertiary (late).

In most cases, syphilis is easily treated with a single dose of medication.

How common is syphilis?

Until this year, syphilis cases were rare in Maine. Syphilis infections are now rapidly increasing in Maine.

Many new infections are occurring in men who have sex with men.

How can I get syphilis?

You can get syphilis by touching a sore that a person has on their penis and testicles, or in the cervix, vagina, anus, rectum, or mouth. The sore is often touched when having oral, anal or vaginal sex. Syphilis can also be passed from mother to child during birth.

Am I at risk for syphilis?

If you have sex, you can get syphilis. You are at risk for getting syphilis if you have unprotected sex—even once. If you have more than one partner, or your partner has other sexual partners, you may even be more at risk of getting syphilis.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

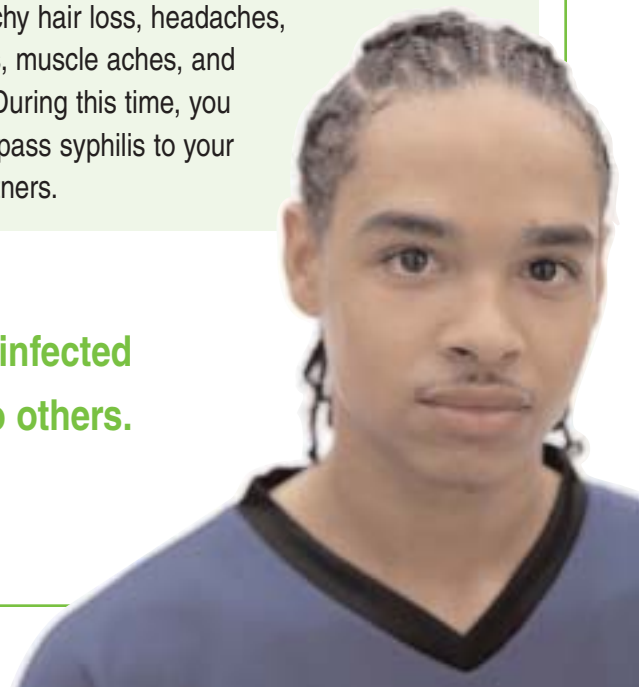
Primary Stage

The first sign of syphilis is usually a single sore (called a “chancre”). The sore is usually firm, round, small, and does not hurt. It can form on the penis, rectum, or vagina; wherever syphilis entered the body. The sore lasts 3-6 weeks, and it will heal on its own. During this time, you can easily pass syphilis to your sexual partners. If you are not treated for syphilis, the infection moves into the secondary stage.

Secondary Stage

The second stage starts when one or more areas of the skin break into a rash that usually does not itch. The rash can appear as soon as the sore goes away or may not appear for weeks. The rash often appears as rough, red or reddish brown spots on the palms of the hands and on the bottoms of the feet. The rash also may appear on other parts of the body. Sometimes the rashes are so faint they are not easily seen. Even without treatment, rashes clear up on their own. In addition to rashes, second-stage symptoms can include fever, swollen glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and tiredness. During this time, you can easily pass syphilis to your sexual partners.

Having syphilis makes it easier to become infected with HIV or to spread HIV to others.



Latent (Hidden) and Tertiary (Late) Syphilis

The latent (hidden) stage of syphilis begins when the secondary symptoms go away. If you are not treated, you still have syphilis even if the symptoms are completely gone. If syphilis is not treated, it can lead to long-term health problems, causing damage to the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints.

In late stage syphilis, symptoms include not being able to move well, paralysis, numbness, blindness and dementia. This damage may be serious enough to cause death.

How do I know if I have syphilis?

Doctors or other health care workers can do a test to see if you have syphilis. Usually, this means taking a small amount of blood, or looking at fluid from open sores under a microscope.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is treated with medication such as penicillin. There are no home remedies or over-the-counter drugs that will cure syphilis. Although medication will stop the infection, it will not fix any damage already done by the disease.

Can I get syphilis more than once?

Yes. Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. You can get infected again if you have sex with someone who has syphilis.

How can I protect myself against syphilis?

Use a latex condom correctly every time you have sex. A condom put on the penis before starting sex and worn until the penis is withdrawn can help protect you and your partner. Condoms **do not** provide complete protection because syphilis sores can be on areas of the body that are not covered by a condom. You may not be able to tell that your sex partner has syphilis because syphilis sores can be hidden in the vagina, rectum, or mouth. Washing the penis or vagina, peeing, or douching after sex **does not** prevent STDs, including syphilis.

If you think you have syphilis, avoid having sex and see a health care provider immediately. If you are diagnosed with syphilis or any other STD, you should tell all of your recent sex partners so that they can see a health care provider and be treated.

Do not have sex until both you and your partner(s) have finished treatment.

Where can I get more information?

- **Ask your health care provider**
- **Maine Bureau of Health:**
Phone: 287-2046
www.MainePublicHealth.org/STD
- **Call your local health clinic:**
Bangor: 947-0700
Auburn: 795-4019
Portland: 756-8067
- **Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Website:**
www.cdc.gov/std
- **CDC National STD Hotline:**
(800) 227-8922 or
(800) 342-2437
En Español (800) 344-7432
TTY for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (800) 243-7889

